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SUBJECT: PLANS FOR SALWEEN DAMS MOVE AHEAD DESPITE OPPOSITION

REF: A. A) (06) BANGKOK 7422 (REFORM BUT NO BIG CHANGES: THAILAND'S NEW MINISTER OF ENERGY SPEAKS)

[1](#)B. B) (06) CHIANG MAI 66 (DAMMED BY THE GENERALS: REPORT CRITICIZES SALWEEN DAM PROJECTS)

[1](#)C. C) (06) CHIANG MAI 51 (SALWEEN DAM PROPOSALS GENERATE ALARM)

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: NGOs, academics and former senators opposed to the building of dams along the Salween River predict the project will bring dire human rights, environmental and cultural disruption to the region. However, the post-coup Thai regime is sticking to the course set by the government of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of investing in hydropower from Burma to slake some of Thailand's energy needs. Thailand's new Minister of Energy reportedly discussed the project with the Burmese government on Dec. 6 (ref a), following the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) May 2006 agreement with China's Sinohydro for joint investment in Burma's Karen State. End summary

[1](#)2. (U) The Salween, the last major undammed river in Southeast Asia, runs 2,800 km from Tibet through China and into Burma; it forms the Thai-Burma border for a 118-kilometer stretch near Mae Sariang in Mae Hong Son province. While the Thai government has refused to release to the public several agreements it has made with Burma to build dams on the Salween, a number of Thai, Burmese, and Chinese NGOs are actively seeking information and publicizing concerns about the planned projects. A Nov. 23-24 conference on "Mekong-Salween: Peoples, Water and the Golden Land of Suvarnabhumi/Southeast Asia" brought together 500 Thai teachers, researchers, NGO workers and government officials in Chiang Mai. Participants also visited an area in Mae Hong Son likely to be flooded by the Hat Gyi dam.

[1](#)3. (U) Researchers at the November conference warned that hydropower dams on the Salween would adversely affect Karen, Karenni, and other ethnic and tribal groups as a result of forced labor used in dam construction and flooding once the dams are completed. Charm Tong, a Shan activist and co-author of the 2002 "License to Rape" expose of Burma Army abuses, predicted that more Burma Army troops would be deployed to protect the construction site at Ta Sang in Shan State, where a Thai company, MDX, has already sent heavy equipment and set up camps. These disruptions within Burma would increase the number of migrants flowing into Thailand, she warned. Karen Rivers Watch and the Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN) estimated the Hat Gyi dam would drive 30,000-80,000 people out of Burma while the Karenni Development Research Group estimated that the Wei Gyi dam would displace about 30,000 people.

--Thai agreement with Burma --

[1](#)4. (U) The Thai and Burmese Ministries of Energy signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in May 2005 to conduct a feasibility study for five dams on the Salween (ref c). The two that appear to be furthest along in planning are to be built at Hat Gyi in Karen State with Chinese investment and Ta Sang in Shan State. Another three Salween dams are reportedly planned at Wei Gyi, Dar Gwin and Ywathit in Karenni State with an additional one on the Tenasserim River. NGOs claim that these six dams would have a maximum capacity of about 16,000 MW per year, which, if true, would satisfy half of Thailand's estimated energy needs in 2012. Others consider this figure far too high.

¶5. (U) Although anti-dam activists were initially encouraged by an Oct. 9 announcement from new Minister of Energy Piyasvasti Amranand that he would shelve plans to build a network of hydropower dams on the Salween river system in Myanmar, Piyasvasti reportedly resumed discussions of the Hat Gyi project while accompanying Prime Minister Surayud to Burma Dec. 6.

¶6. (SBU) EGAT Environmental Division Director Rewat Suwanakitti told the Consulate Jan. 8 that the state enterprise plans to complete its feasibility survey of the Hat Gyi site in late 2007 and then make a final decision on whether to build the dam, which he said would have a capacity of 600-1000 MW per year. (According to EGAT forecasts, Thailand is expected to need 23,000 MW in 2007.) He said that EGAT's survey team is protected by Burmese military forces in an area controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), described by Embassy Rangoon as the Burmese regime's proxy army.

¶7. (SBU) Rewat explained that the 2005 MOU between the Thai and Burmese governments "was signed at a time when EGAT was in trouble with NGO movements against dams in Thailand and EGAT desperately needed new power sources." In May 2006, EGAT signed an agreement with China's Sinohydro for joint investment if the project proves feasible. Neither MOU has been made available to the public.

-- NGO efforts --

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¶8. (U) Frustrated by the refusal of EGAT and the Ministry of Energy to release either of the two MOUs concerning the dams, Thai NGOs, academics, and several former senators have publicized their concerns through a series of actions and conferences, including the November conference in Chiang Mai held under the auspices of the Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project (FPSHTP).

¶9. (U) Key academics in the FPSHTP, which began in 1978 with Rockefeller Foundation funding, include Prof. Saneh Jamarik, chair of the National Human Rights National Human Rights Commission, and Dr. Charnvit Kasetsiri, President of Thammasat University 1994-1995. Both were involved in a 1970s movement to oppose a dam in northeast Thailand, commemorated in the underground film "Tongpan". The alliance also includes several activist former senators, including Kraisaak Choonhavan, Jermsak Pinthong and Tuanjai Deetes, who were instrumental in extracting information about the planned dams from secretive EGAT.

¶10. (U) Other active opponents to the dam projects include SEARIN, led by coordinator Pianporn Deetes, as well as Salween Watch, the Karenni Development Research and Karen River Watch, a network of six Karen organizations that work together to protect natural resources and human rights. These NGOs organized a gathering of 400 Karen at the Salween in March 2006, which they dubbed "World Anti Dam Day", arranged field trips to the border, and staged a Nov. 30 demonstration in front of the World Bank office in Bangkok. Working with civil society groups in China, they have also petitioned the Thai and Chinese governments to stop the dams.

¶11. (U) These efforts have not deterred EGAT and the Ministry of Energy from pursuing hydropower generation plans in Burma and Pianporn is not optimistic that SEARIN will be able to force EGAT to conduct an environmental impact assessment. Nevertheless, "getting EGAT out into the light would be a success for us," Pianporn told Consulate staff, explaining that her organization is pushing for greater transparency by EGAT in both Thailand and Burma.

--Comment --

¶12. (U) At least some of the hydropower dams planned for the Salween River are likely to be built despite NGO opposition and the expected negative impact on border areas. Although activists initially hoped that Thaksin's ouster would bring a slowing of Thai investment in Burma, the reality is that both governments have too much to gain from hydropower development on the Salween. Thailand needs the energy supply and Burma needs the hard currency the projects will bring; damming the Salween would satisfy both.

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